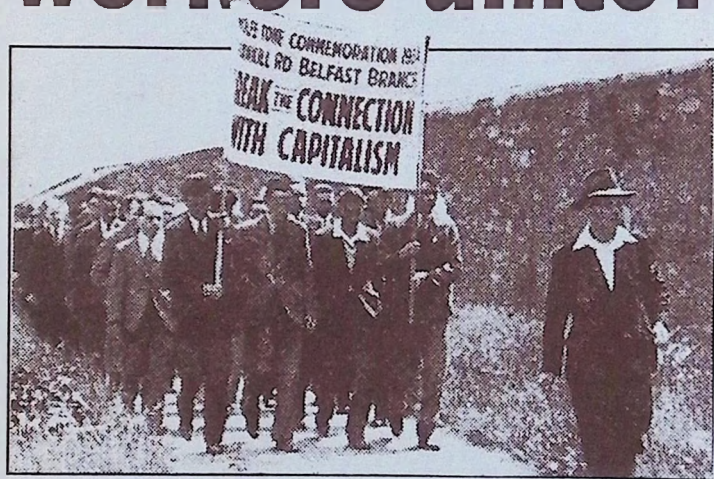


NORTHERN IRELAND: Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?



by Mark Hewitt

A Socialist Worker pamphlet

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Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

1. Why is there sectarianism in Northern Ireland?

In every other country divisions between Protestant and Catholic are meaningless. Yet in Northern Ireland religious background is a source of violence and even murder. The conflict is sometimes presented as a form of "ethnic cleansing" between two sides who cannot tolerate each other.

But to see the conflict in Northern Ireland as a war between two religious "tribes" is to portray its people as irrational fanatics. It offers no real explanation for why the division has come about, nor why it is sustained. More importantly it offers little hope for the future.

If the rivalry between Protestant and Catholic is inherited from the past, and sustained without any real cause, then there is no basis to suppose it will ever change. Indeed the disintegration of Yugoslavia is seen by many commentators and politicians to be a model of what might happen here.

Socialists however are much more confident that sectarianism can be challenged. This is because the rivalry here is not arbitrary. It has real causes, arising from the way our society works, and the way it has been run in the past, particularly in the development of capitalism and the interests of the capitalist class.

The key events in the emergence of sectarian rivalry are the settlement of Ireland with the plantations; the growth of Belfast and the North-East as an industrial power; and the partition of Ireland.

The Plantations

Religious differences first became important in Ireland as Britain's rulers attempted to raise money through conquering and colonising the country. Revolts by the peasantry made the country difficult to secure. In 1649 an attempt was made to strengthen the hold through the Plantation of Ulster.

This made it easier for Cromwell to colonise Ireland in the 1640s.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Cromwell came to power in England through a struggle that broke the power of the old feudal orders. The English Revolution was a great step forward against injustice and oppression. Many of the soldiers who took part in that revolution protested that they should not be sent to Ireland to "eradicate the natives or divest them of their estates".

But that is just what happened. If the English Revolution struck a blow for liberty at home it also meant a thorough and brutal conquest abroad. In the process Irish peasants were driven from their land and resistance was crushed. By the end of the 1690's the local population had suffered mercilessly at the hands of their victors and were subjected to the most violent laws.

The main motive in the conquest of Ireland was profit. However, since the Irish peasants were Catholics, and the conquerors Protestant, religion was used as the basis for determining who had a voice in the state.

The Penal Code—a series of acts passed in 1692—made it illegal for Catholics to vote or teach in schools or even publish or sell newspapers and books. Protestants lost their civil rights if they married a Catholic and the Catholic church was suppressed. The only education available to Catholics was through the illegal hedge schools.

The oppression of Catholics was not the only outcome of sectarianism. The plantations led to the existence of a mixed peasantry. There were many poor Protestant farmers, who like their Catholic counterparts, suffered from poverty, famine and disease. Sectarianism was encouraged in order to dissuade these Protestant peasants from uniting with Catholics to better the conditions of both.

In Antrim, for example, Protestant tenants were evicted by Lord Donegal and replaced by Catholics. As the first Irish Marxist, James Connolly pointed out, the major difference between the Catholic poor and the Protestant poor was that one was "despoiled by force and the other by fraud".

By the 1790s an organisation did emerge that might have united Protestant and Catholics. This was the United Irishmen. This organisation was led by the Protestant industrialists of Belfast who sympathised with the democratic demands of the French revolution. They rebelled against British restrictions on Irish trade and commerce and sought to link up with the grievances of the Irish peasantry. But their defeat ensured that Ireland remained a colony—and that sectarianism would prosper.

Colonisation meant that Ireland as a whole was locked into a state of backwardness and underdevelopment. The Navigation Acts prohibited direct trade between Ireland and the other colonies. Later the pressure of competition from British industry wiped out the textile industry of the South. Land grabbing was given a free rein so that as late as 1872, 774 landlords owned 10 million acres in Ireland—half the total surface of the country. The result was a continual flow of funds from the Irish countryside into the

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

pockets of the British aristocracy.

Northern Industry and the Orange bosses

The one area of Irish industry to eventually prosper under the British Empire was that of Belfast. Whilst the rest of Ireland was sucked dry with a horrific series of famines, the North East textiles and engineering industries expanded rapidly. Scottish raw materials; British finance and markets tied the Northern employers to the Empire. Belfast itself grew from 28,000 people in 1813 to 100,300 in 1851 and tripled again from 120,000 in 1860 to 350,000 by 1900. The rural poor flocked to towns to find work and seek a life-style they had heard rumours about. They provided bosses with very cheap labour, so cheap in fact, that Scottish firms could afford to send yarn to Ireland where it was woven and bleached, returned to Scotland for packaging and finally sent once more to Ireland to sell.

Skilled workers earned similar rates to workers on the Clyde and Mersey, but labourers, who were the vast majority of workers, were paid about half the rates of those in Britain.

Wealthy industrialists such as Harland, Mackie, Workman and Clark came from Britain to seek this labour. They calculated that as Belfast had easy access to the ports of Liverpool and Glasgow then the extra cost of coal and iron were more than compensated for in the amount of profits to be extracted from such cheap labour.

The uneven development of Ireland that was a direct outcome of colonialism had a direct impact on the growth of sectarianism. Within the working class the massive increase in population in Belfast meant there was fierce competition for jobs. This was particularly marked in unskilled areas of employment since the trade unions organised only the skilled workers. Not having a job meant misery and the threat of starvation.

Not surprisingly workers used any means to get to the front of the queue for work. For poor unskilled Protestant workers this meant joining the Orange lodges—which they did in their thousands.

Originally created to divide Protestant and Catholic peasants, the lodges were shaped by the employers into means of dividing workers, and of providing themselves with a following which would help them resist the demands for Home Rule coming from the nationalist middle class in the south. The Orange Lodges encouraged class collaboration as a way of warding off the threat of Catholic competition. The Orange Order refrain went,

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

*Let not the poor man hate the rich
Nor rich on poor look down
But each join each true Orange Order
For God and the Crown*

1835 saw Belfast's first sectarian riot. By 1857 there were 35 lodges in the city with 1,333 members and by 1870 more than 100 lodges with 4,000 members. The employing class then, as now, strove to pull workers apart in order to conquer both sections. The appallingly low wages of labourers bore testimony to the effectiveness of this.

So sectarianism, originally a direct means of domination by the British Empire, became a tool in the hands of the Protestant employers. Similar tactics were common amongst the employers in Britain itself in the nineteenth century. As thousands of poor Irish arrived in Liverpool, Manchester and Edinburgh "anti-Mick" and "anti-Paddy" riots were encouraged to keep workers divided. These divisions were often overcome as Irish and British workers fought side by side in the unions and organisations like the Chartists. But in Ireland the divisions among workers became entrenched as moves developed to partition the country.

Partition

In the early twentieth century the prospect of Home Rule dominated Irish politics. The Northern industrialists opposed it because they wanted to keep their cheap labour supply and maintain the markets supplied by the British empire. They established an Ulster Unionist Council and choose as their leader a bigoted reactionary, Edward Carson who had hounded Oscar Wilde to prison for being gay. The Unionist Council won the support of the British Tory party whose leader Bonar Law told them that whatever steps they took "whether they are constitutional or in the long run unconstitutional", the Tories would support them.

When it came to defending their own interests, the Tories had little respect for parliamentary democracy. Key sections of British capital had investments in Northern Ireland and while they had little to fear from Home Rule politicians in the South, they were terrified of a rising workers movements that could grow up behind them. Their fears were confirmed when, during the Irish War of Independence, workers occupied factories and took over towns like Limerick to proclaim a "soviet". The Tories also wanted a more militant defence of the Empire. They saw the Irish revolt as the first of many. Once they found that they could not win the war in Ireland, the British ruling class fell back on partition to weaken the nationalist movement and to help preserve the confidence and coherence of the empire as a whole.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

James Connolly predicted that partition would lead to a "carnival of reaction" throughout Ireland. He was absolutely right. Two states were created which mirrored each other in bigotry and clerical domination. In the South, the Catholic Church was recognised by the constitution as having a "special place". Contraception, divorce and abortion were banned. Hospitals and schools were taken over by the priests and local communities were excluded from any say in how they should be run. Even the Labour Party succumbed completely to the sectarian Catholic ethos. One of its leaders Brendan Corish was a member of the secret Catholic organisation, the Knights of Columbanus while another, William Norton said that "the Labour Party proudly acknowledges the authority of the Catholic Church in all matters relating to public policy and public welfare".

In the North, the same type of ideas were enshrined in the dominance of the Orange Order. Even to this day politicians like Ian Paisley have no problem joining their Southern counterparts in opposing the opening of a contraceptive clinic like the Brook centre or organising the absurd campaign to "Save Ulster from Sodomy". In the North, however, this sectarianism was connected to a distinct strategy to suppress a large Catholic minority which made up one third of the population.

As soon as the Northern state was founded it recruited a Special Constabulary which was commanded and largely composed of those who had previously belonged to the UVF. Internment was immediately introduced and 728 people, all of them Catholics, were locked up without any trial. Local government electoral boundaries were "gerrymandered" to ensure Unionist control over as many councils as possible.

The local elections of 1920 were fought under a system of proportional representation and the Nationalists gained control of 25 out of 85 councils. The Unionist government would not tolerate this and abolished PR in 1922. As a result, in the local elections of 1924, Nationalists won control of only 2 out of 80 councils.

Under the gerrymandered electoral system, only householders got votes. This meant that the Unionists had good reason to make sure that Catholics were denied housing. In Co. Fermanagh, for example, the council built 1,048 houses between 1946 and 1968. But although the area had a Catholic majority, 195 (18%) went to Catholics and 853 (82%) to Protestants.

Catholics were also discriminated against in employment. The Orange Order encouraged Protestant bosses to discriminate against Catholics looking for jobs. In 1933, Sir John Davison the Grand Master of the Orange Order said:

"It is time Protestant employers of Northern Ireland realised that whenever a Roman Catholic is brought into their employment, it means one Protestant vote less... and I suggest the slogan should be: Protestants employ Protestants."

Both the legal system and police force were Unionist dominated. In 1970, out of the

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

seven High Court judges, three were former Unionist MP's and a fourth the son of a Unionist Minister.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary was an overwhelmingly Protestant force. By 1969 only 11% of its members were Catholics. The part time police force, the B Specials were even worse. From the start they had close loyalist connections.

The Cameron Commission found that **"the recruitment of this force, for traditional and historical reasons, is in practice limited to members of the Protestant faith. Though there is no legal bar to Catholic membership, it is unlikely that Catholic applications would be favourably received even if they were made."**

It is no wonder that Northern Ireland is the one place in the world where religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant is recurrent, for it is the one state in the world where discrimination against Catholics is fundamental to its existence.

The causes of Sectarianism are to be found then, in the inheritance of religious discrimination by Belfast employers from the British Empire, and the subsequent enshrining of that discrimination in the founding of the Northern Ireland state.

So how can it be ended? Is it possible to gradually erode the bias of the Northern state, and so undermine sectarian conflict?

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

2. How can Sectarianism be challenged?

Government Strategy

For more than 20 years, Northern Ireland has been subject to Direct Rule from Britain. Labour and Tory governments have claimed that they were working for an end to discrimination. But has the situation really changed for the better today?

The reality is that Catholics are still discriminated against. In 1976 the Fair Employment Act outlawed discrimination. But so little had changed that the British government had to introduce a new piece of legislation, the 1989 Fair Employment Act.

This gave the Fair Employment Commission powers to investigate any employer at any time, to instruct employers to carry out affirmative action and to disqualify employers that discriminate. In the words of the government, this is "the most radical fair employment law enacted by the UK parliament".

However such legislation is being applied by a state whose institutions and administration are founded upon sectarianism. As a result the Fair Employment Council monitoring reports for 1991 illustrate that equality has not been achieved either in the public or private sector.

Catholics make up about 40% of the population but in many of Northern Ireland's major places of employment they do not hold a fair share of jobs. The table below illustrates this.

Religious Breakdown of selected employment for N.I., 1991-92

Company	No. of Employees	Catholics (%)	1991 Appointees	Catholics (%)
N.I. Railways	867	22	86	18
N.I. Electricity	5,668	20	136	30
Harland & Wolff	2,691	6	549	5
Short Bros. plc	8,647	12	896	17
Ulster Bank plc	1,848	23	170	19

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

The information from the table was compiled two years after the act came into force, and as the appointees for 1991 prove, some companies have taken on a lower proportion of Catholics than their already under-representative levels.

Those who have taken on Catholics above their ratio have done so at a rate that will barely affect the balance. The overall result is that Catholics are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than Protestants.

Furthermore, the recession has worsened since these surveys were produced. In 1992 firms were laying off significant numbers of workers. Compared to the 1950's when Harland and Wolff employed over 25,000 workers, the company now employs just 10% of that number.

Officially unemployment has gradually increased from 5.7% in the early 1970's to 15% at the start of the 1990's. The Belfast Telegraph reported at the end of July 1992 that "Heathrow airport now employs more people than manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland".

What is really needed to undercut bitterness at the consequences of unemployment and recession is a massive boost to jobs. Shipyards could be expanded to refit the world's ageing tanker fleet, building workers could be given jobs constructing decent housing and more hospitals. There is a huge variety of needs which if they were met could completely change the direction of the economy of Northern Ireland.

This is a solution which will not happen so long as the management of affairs is in the hands of the bosses. The world recession, and the need to maximise profits prevent them from any such action.

Not only are our rulers incapable of developing the economy in such a way as to remove the pools of poverty and unemployment in Northern Ireland, but they have no interest in weakening sectarianism. The division between workers acts to deflect anger away from the employers.

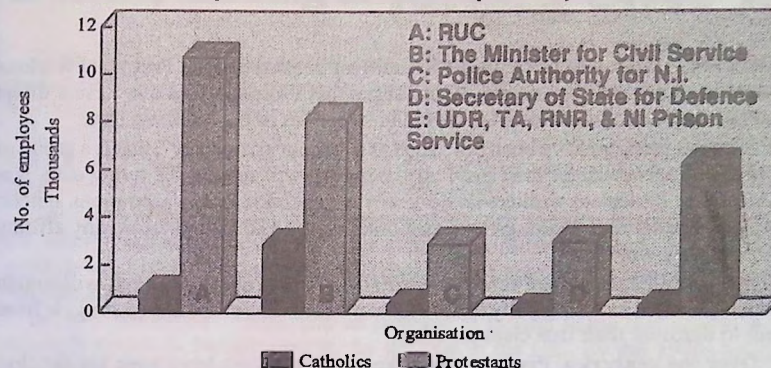
So for example, when redundancies were recently announced at Shorts, it was in management's interest to leak the news that more Protestants were to be laid off than Catholics. The DUP were quick to capitalise on the sectarian feelings and send leading members to speak to the Protestant workers in Shorts, stirring them up against their Catholic workmates. In the meantime the bosses can push through the redundancies.

Our rulers have no intention of providing the injection of wealth needed to improve the lives of all workers in Northern Ireland. Nor have they any interest therefore in ending sectarianism.

This can be clearly seen in the continued discrimination of the security forces. In every country the police operate to ensure that exploitation is carried out with relative stability for the rich. In the case of Northern Ireland this means enforcing discrimination and the oppression that goes with it.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Religious breakdown of security related jobs (1990/91)



The graph shows over 30,000 people are used to police the state—and that does not include the army. Many are involved on a part-time basis. These forces are overwhelmingly Protestant. Over 95% of the RUC, for example, are Protestant. Catholics are under-represented because these bodies maintain their oppression.

Some claim that Catholics are under-represented because they are soft targets for the IRA. But when the IRA had no support the number of Catholics in the security forces remained small.

Any solution to sectarianism in Northern Ireland is going to have to come about by challenging the current rulers. That is why parties such as the SDLP and the Alliance Party, which take for granted the continued privileged position of employers, will never succeed in bringing about significant change.

3. Who gains?

If there is continuing discrimination in Northern Ireland do Protestant workers benefit from this state of affairs? Many argue that Protestant workers have a direct material interest in preserving the sectarian structures of the Northern state.

Protestant workers have been described as a "labour aristocracy", that is a group of workers who, because of their privileged position, will support the ruling elite. It is claimed that Protestant workers do not really have working class aspirations at heart but would rather march alongside their bosses on the 12th July than see any affinity with Catholic workers.

The Republican argument echoes this in its belief that Protestant workers will remain copper-fastened in their loyalty to the state until such time as the armed struggle frees them to discover their true class position:

"Over the centuries, Protestant workers and farmers have been taught that loyalty to the British Crown guaranteed them marginal privileges over their Catholic neighbours. Loyalism has thus become hopelessly entangled with the British state's military presence in Ireland, creating a colonialist aristocracy of labour dependent to a degree on the British military machine for employment...

"Before Loyalist workers can ever discover their real class interests, that military machine must be destroyed. Any attempt to delay struggle until the majority of Loyalists allow the scales of imperialism to drop from their eyes is misplaced."

Even some on the left accept the argument that Protestant workers are aristocrats of the working class who are tied to "their" state. Geoff Bell who wrote an early left wing analysis of the Protestant working class claimed that:

"What privileges there were in Ireland were enjoyed by the Protestant community. The main area of Protestant concentration in Ireland, the north east, has a higher standard of living, comparable at some levels to that in Britain"

Bell and others in People's Democracy argued that the state had to be destroyed before there could be talk of class unity and socialism. It is not surprising that socialists who have held such a view have melted into the Republican movement.

Yet despite the consensus view, a look at the real conditions of Protestant workers demolishes all these arguments.

Income, housing and unemployment

These areas alone are enough to determine the quality of life we have, and whether we have a stake in the way society is currently run. All three show that conditions in Northern Ireland are much worse than in the UK as a whole.

In 1989 the average weekly income of Catholic households was £198.55 and £235.10 for Protestants. A difference of 18%. But the average household income for Britain was £303.84, 23% more than for Protestants.

One consequence of this is that when essentials such as clothing and food are paid for, British workers have slightly more to spend on other household goods; so that workers in Northern Ireland are less likely to own a computer, video, tumble drier, telephone or microwave oven.

In 1885, the Royal Commission on Housing in Ireland found that conditions of accommodation in Belfast were by far the best in the UK. By the 1940s housing conditions in Northern Ireland were amongst the worst. Around 60% of Belfast's population lived in wards which were so overcrowded that if health standards had been enforced two thirds of the population would have had to move out.

During the long boom after the second world war, the Unionist Government reluctantly undertook a modernisation programme of housing stock in line with Britain. Of course it was carried out in a sectarian manner with new housing being targeted to Protestant areas such as Lister and Newtownabbey, but compared to their British counterparts, workers in the North still lagged behind.

By the 1970s just over 7% of British workers lived in unfit dwellings compared to nearly 20% of Northern Irish workers. Similar figures are recorded for having no internal toilet (12% in Britain, 24% in NI) and no fixed bath (17% in Britain, 26% in NI).

The situation hasn't changed over the last 20 years. The NI House Condition survey found that 8.4% of all dwelling stock was unfit to live in, almost twice the British level. This feeds into the high death rate caused by pneumonia—in 1990 the rate amongst men in NI was four times the rate of the UK as a whole.

From before partition to the present day, unemployment in the north has been significantly higher than in Britain. In 1986, the official unemployment rate for Northern Ireland was 18.6% whilst the average for Britain was 11.8%.

Given lower income, worse housing and higher unemployment the idea that we would all be worse off without the British link is nonsense. Moreover the notion that within this sea of deprivation there exists one section of the working class that are aristocrats is total fantasy. It is not at all surprising that more people in Northern Ireland identify themselves as working class (69%) than in Britain.

A walk along the Shankill Rd. and the Falls Rd. is enough to demolish the myth of the aristocracy of labour. However a slightly different version of the argument is that

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

the state security forces work against Catholics, and their presence benefits Protestant workers. This idea is also false.

The state against workers

The Northern Ireland state is able to use the outcry that follows bombings in order to pass ruthless laws which otherwise would not be considered acceptable. However, once implemented this legislation is used without hesitation against workers whenever they are involved in a trade union dispute that local management cannot deal with.

The Special Powers Act (SPA)

This Act was passed in the early 1920s to protect the newly created, unstable Northern state. The SPA enabled search, arrest and detention without warrant and meant that basic civil liberties could be removed such as the right to hold a meeting, join an organisation or produce publications. It was brought in as a temporary measure and had to be ratified by Stormont Parliament every year.

Initially brought in to deal with the Republican movement this adaptable piece of legislation was used throughout the 1920s and the 1930s against working class agitation.

In 1925 a mass demonstration was planned in Belfast to coincide with the opening of Parliament at Stormont. It was called to protest at the high levels of unemployment but was banned by the Unionist Government using the SPA.

During the 1932 Outdoor Relief Strike the Act was invoked to ban mass demonstrations as well as meetings, making it more difficult for Catholic and Protestant workers to unite together.

This was a deliberate attempt to prevent workers from obtaining basic reforms to the notorious Relief scheme that made the unemployed work for the most miserable amounts of benefit. Furthermore, the SPA was used to prevent solidarity, so speakers from Britain were not only banned from addressing strikers but were actually deported from Belfast.

The Unionist Prime Minister, Craig, saw how useful a tool the SPA could be in attacking workers' unity and thus made the legislation permanent in 1933.

During the Second World War, in anticipation of agitation by left-wingers, the Unionist Government used the SPA to lock up leading Communists and suppress their publications.

The point is clear, this legislation will be used against workers, Protestant and Catholic.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

The Payment of Debt Act (PDA)

This law was introduced in 1971 to smash a rent and rate strike that Catholics had begun as a protest against internment. Internment itself was made possible through the use of the Special Powers Act. The PDA gave the state broad powers to recover arrears from those involved in the strike, some 26,000 families. Wages could be deducted from government employees or benefits could be reduced for those on social security.

By 1976 the legislation was being employed against rent defaulters generally. The number in rent arrears increased sharply in 1976 as a result of the Labour Government's decision to bring Northern Ireland rents into line with those in Britain.

Up to then rents in the North were about 60% of those across the water. For some families this meant increases of 125% in the years 1976 to 1979 causing severe financial crises especially amongst unemployed or low paid Catholic and Protestant workers.

What had begun as a response to the activity of one section of the working class now became a blanket solution to problems of payment that all workers face. In more recent years the PDA has become the blueprint for changes in the social security system, enabling the Government to deal more effectively with rent and electricity debts of claimants and has become a central part of the dreaded Child Support Act.

Public Order Act

The Public Order Act, unlike the PDA, was brought in supposedly to contain loyalist protests against the introduction of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Act places severe restrictions on the right to demonstrate and attend meetings, giving the police even greater powers to intimidate ordinary people. Any gathering of more than three people is defined as a meeting and before marches can take place the permission of the RUC must be granted.

The Act has not curbed provocative loyalist marches through Catholic areas and has not ended the sectarian attitude of the police in deciding which marches take place. So loyalist bands were allowed to march past a betting shop on the Lower Ormeau Road not long after five Catholics were killed there by loyalist gunmen. Similarly, whilst every July sees Orange parades take place through the centre of Belfast, nationalist marches are prevented from doing so.

But the Act has been used against workers whenever they threaten to take action. This was the case in October 1988 when it was used to arrest supporters of strikers at a Belfast clothes shop.

The shop workers at Chelsea Girl were sacked because they joined a union to protect themselves from management attempts to worsen their working conditions. The police used the POA to intimidate and arrest pickets and to attack a demonstration called in

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

support of the strikers.

The same Act has the potential to weaken struggles that are not only economic. The anti-Gulf War campaign, the defence of the Brook centre, the marches against sectarianism are all types of struggles that are threatened by the use of such legislation.

No worker in Northern Ireland has an interest in seeing areas like West Belfast subject to discrimination and repression from the army and the police. Quite the opposite. It is because Catholic workers have been subjected to oppression that Protestant workers have lost out.

Protestant workers today find themselves mainly in low paid public sector jobs. They find that their hospital services are being run down. They find that many of their number are confined to a life of unemployment.

The UDA and UVF try to use the bitterness that has emerged to point the finger at Catholic areas. They claim that Catholic youth clubs and community centres are "getting all the grants." They hope that their attacks on the "pan-nationalist community" can win supporters for their extreme right wing cause.

Bigots like Paisley also try to stoke up the sectarian fires. Paisley, for example, turned up on platforms to support the Jubilee hospital which is situated in Protestant areas but did not say a word about the fate of the Royal Victoria which is in West Belfast.

But the divisions that the UDA and Paisley encourage only make it easier for the Tories to push through their plans for privatisation and their attacks on social welfare. The Tories want workers to "compete" against each other on the free market. The bigots do the Tories dirty work.

That is why socialists argue that there is no privileged group of workers in Northern Ireland. The divisions between us have made us all lose out. This is why we have to work to build class unity between Catholic and Protestant workers. But can this be done?

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

4. Workers against the state

On numerous occasions workers, Catholic and Protestant have come together in Northern Ireland to fight together to better or defend their wages, working conditions or union organisation. For socialists these occasions are extremely important for they challenge the notion that sectarianism is everlasting and point a way forward to ending the continued slaughter.

Not through moral appeals to better natures, or a return to religious values, have workers come together. The unity came from one fact—that the working class has to fight together every inch of the way to make gains from the capitalist class. From the vote, to the right to organise in trade unions, some have been handed to us but bitterly struggled for.

When workers do fight, any division will threaten the success of that struggle and so the potential arises to overcome age old prejudices.

There are many day to day struggles that take place in the workplace against the boss but periodically there have been massive struggles that have shown the possibility of completely breaking sectarianism. The first such struggle took place 13 years before partition.

The 1907 Dock Strike

The arrival of James Larkin in 1907 to Belfast coincided with an upsurge of worker's militancy and his attempts to unionise workers sparked a series of strikes for better wages and union recognition.

The Belfast bosses fiercely resisted the union, while at the same time Larkin constantly strove for escalations and solidarity action. By the end of June Dockers, Carters, Coal workers and tobacco workers were involved in strikes and rioting.

In their alarm, the employers brought in 500 soldiers of the Royal Sussex Regiment to aid the police, all carters were locked out and the Unionist newspaper The Northern Whig commented

"We are on the eve of an experience something akin to that which has paralysed Russian cities during the last couple of years"

The next month was to prove the paper right. Firstly one thousand carters still at work

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

struck and when coal workers were instructed to return following a lockout almost 1000 stayed out. Throughout one week in July over 7000 workers were laid off. Furthermore the trams did not run and the lack of coal was hitting heavy industry.

Throughout the month three strike meetings a day were held attended by between three and 10,000 workers. On Saturday 26th July around 200,000 workers marched throughout the city including along the Falls Rd and Shankill Rd.

Such was the mood of militancy, dissent spread to the police who were stretched by the strikes. Influenced by the massive demonstration the police mutinied a day later when 800 constables attended a banned meeting and marched to Customs House—a place traditionally used by socialists and trade unionists for rallies.

The situation was desperate for the Unionist bosses who were backed by the Official Orange Lodge and the hierarchy of the Catholic church. Belfast was without police and the workers struggle was at its height with the city virtually in the grip of a general strike.

During the month which traditionally has Protestant workers marching with their bosses, the class division proved stronger than the religious one. Thousands of Catholics and Protestants were united in their economic struggle.

The excitement and feeling of power attracted many workers to mass meetings where they heard speakers talk about revolution. In the words of John McClean, a Scottish socialist:

"They are rolling up in tens of thousands ... to listen to the revolutionary gospel of socialism".

Tragically national union leaders, in particular James Sexton, stepped in to negotiate above the heads of the strikers. They did a deal to get the coal workers to return and settled the ironmoulders dispute, thus undermining the solidarity created amongst the Belfast working class and weakening the hand of the dockers who were still out.

The Unionist bosses saw their chance: in an attempt to 'restore order' Belfast was flooded with 10,000 troops, over 200 police were transferred out of the city and full protection was restored to blacklegs. The soldiers saturated the Falls Rd area and rioting broke out. The tactic of divide and rule was now put into play.

Most workers knew the role of the army was to smash the strike and were against their deployment, posters were put up around the city urging "Belfast men and workers [to] stand together and don't be misled by the employers game of dividing Catholics and Protestants".

However the union leaders and labour politicians were afraid of escalating the movement further—while the rank and file organisation was not developed enough to provide an alternative leadership.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

One by one the officials negotiated deals that sold the work-force short and section by section they returned leaving the dockers isolated. Without achieving many of their original demands the dockers drifted back to work in September.

Nevertheless, the fact that workers united to improve their lot before partition destroys the myth that Ireland was partitioned in the interests of all Protestants irrespective of class.

The 1919 General Strike

All over the world, workers were inspired by the revolution of 1917 in Russia, and disgusted with their rulers for the carnage of World War One. This confidence, as well as the need to find work for returning soldiers, meant that in 1919 the workers of Belfast were determined to win a reduction in the working week to 44 hours.

The strike began amongst engineering and shipyard workers on Saturday 25th January and within hours all trams had stopped, the city was without gas and only the hospitals had a minimum electricity supply.

Large crowds of workers roamed the dark streets throwing bricks through the windows of any premises which dared use any of the power that had been let through.

By the end of the week thousands were laid off work, there was a serious shortage of bread and cinemas and restaurants were closed. The Belfast Newsletter reported that "the future of the whole world [was] in the melting pot."

Massive picketing closed down the major workplaces, including linen mills, Belfast Ropeworks and newspaper printers. Some 40,000 Catholic and Protestant workers were directly involved in the strike, another 20,000 indirectly.

After the strike ended the Lord Mayor of Belfast admitted that at this time he was "absolutely at the mercy of the strike committee".

The leaders of the strike were far behind the activity of their members. After a week they compromised with the employers of the shipyard workers. An offer was made of working week of length "fewer than 47 hours" which the strike leadership suggested "was the very last ounce [the employers] were willing to give".

Remarkably, with nothing in the way of a fighting lead, the strikers voted on Friday the 14th February by 11,963 votes to 8,774 to reject the offer. The next day troops were used to get the gasworkers and power stations working.

Up until that point because of the militancy of the strikers, the Orange capitalist class had been fearful of using the army. However since they had been used to great effect in Glasgow to crush the strikes there and given that the leaders of the Belfast strike were vacillating, the government took the gamble to send them in.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

The strikers responded at a mass meeting on Sunday the 16th, passing a resolution to call out transport workers. This was ignored by their leaders who met with the employers and without obtaining an improved offer recommended a return to work.

By the end of the 4th week since the strike started, Belfast's first General Strike had ended. Willie Gallacher a socialist who visited the City at the time of the strike commented :

"Belfast was a ferment of working class revolt. Every rotten agency of reaction, religious, political and reformist trade union official was used in an attempt to disrupt the forces, but for the three weeks of the strike the mass unity of all Belfast workers, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Ulsterman was maintained."

The solidarity and workers unity did not simply disappear—the May Day march of that year, the biggest ever in Belfast saw over 100,000 workers participating. However following defeat Orange capitalists were eventually able to whip up sectarianism and once again divide workers along religious lines.

The defeat of the 1919 general strike made the ruling classes plans for partition all the easier to implement.

1932 : The Outdoor Relief Riots

The world depression of the 1930's hit Belfast as hard as any where else. Officially 72,000 people were out of work, unofficially it was over 100,000. The numbers included thousands from the shipyards and engineering factories.

Many had to apply for relief from the Board of Guardians, a council made up of mainly businessmen, or the workhouse. "Relief" came in the form of either a miserable cash allowance paid to those on the outdoor relief scheme who repaired roads and laid paving stones, or a food package to those not on the scheme.

An independent socialist organisation called the Revolutionary Workers Group (RWG) set up an Outdoor Relief Workers Committee in Belfast to try and improve the conditions of the unemployed. They demanded better pay, full relief for single people and an end to payment in kind.

The ODR Committee set to work and organised a strike of the workers on the scheme. Two thousand labourers began their strike on Monday 4th October. Pickets made sure it was solid and that evening up to 60,000 people marched in Belfast demanding "work, wages not charity". The next day 7000 of the unemployed marched on the workhouse.

Demonstrations continued throughout the week and by Friday the Board of Guardians offered a 50% increase in relief rates. This was rejected and the Committee called for a massive march the following Tuesday backed up by sympathy strikes as

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

well as a rent, hire purchase and school strike.

The Unionist establishment hit back with a mixture of repression and sectarianism. On Monday 11th Oct. the RUC banned the march using the Special Powers Act and 700 extra police were drafted in to back up the regulars. Prime Minister Craig and Unionist MP's called on Protestants "not to be duped by those who had no love for the Union Jack" and asked for "Protestants, rich and poor to stand together".

Class unity proved stronger than imposed bigotry. That Tuesday crowds began to gather at the 4 assembly points : Falls Road; Shankill Road (west Belfast); Templemore Avenue (east Belfast) and York Road (north Belfast). The RUC attempted violently to break up the crowds, triggering off rioting.

This began on the Falls but soon spread to the Shankill and other parts of the city—Catholic fought alongside Protestant, the enemy was the RUC. The barricades put up to keep out the police remained in the east and west of the city for days.

The RUC imposed a week long curfew and began searching houses on the Falls, a mainly Catholic area. Their strategy was simple—they attempted to diffuse the situation by dividing workers along sectarian lines, blaming an ineffective IRA for the violence. An official of the NILP summed up the position of the Unionist establishment :

"Lord Craigavon's [Prime Minister] solution was to divide the workers into religious camps and it was noteworthy that although the recent trouble was spread all over the city, only in a Roman Catholic area did the police use their guns".

The Belfast Trades Councils support for the strike was tokenistic, they had offered just £5 to the strike fund of the relief workers. They used the riots to gain influence in negotiations and threatened to call a general strike if the demands of the workers were not met.

The Unionist Government saw their chance to go over the heads of the workers and Craigavon thanked the Trades Council for their responsible intervention. The Government pressurised the Board of Guardians into making more concessions such as increasing by up to 150%, the relief rates and abolishing payment in kind.

Using sectarianism, violence, minor concessions and trade union officials the Unionist Government headed off the biggest danger to the state since 1919.

A more decisive victory could have been won if the sympathy of the rest of Belfast's workers had been turned into action. The political approach of the RWG did not help them achieve this. Rather than appeal for united action, and put tingdemands on the Trades Council and the NILP, the RWG dismissed them as "social-fascists".

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

The 1933 Railway Strike

The level of militancy displayed in the Relief strike fed into a dispute involving Northern railway workers beginning on the 31st January 1933. The railway unions called an official strike to halt a 15% cut in wages.

On the first day of the strike the Dublin to Belfast train was derailed in County Louth killing 2 scabs, trains were stoned and lorries brought in to transport freight were halted. Demonstrations took place supporting the strikers, the one on the 24th March involved 5,000 people.

The demonstrations led to solidarity action, 800 carters and dockers struck in Belfast when scabs were used to load blacked goods. The first GNR bus that finally made it to Dublin was burnt by a crowd sympathetic to the mainly Protestant strikers.

A settlement was reached on the 6th April, the wage cut being half of what the employers wanted.

The Republican Congress

One of the organisations that militant Catholic and Protestant workers joined at this time was the Republican Congress. This was a left wing breakaway from the republican movement and originally it proclaimed its goals as a fight for a socialist republic.

They established five branches in Belfast, four in mainly Protestant areas and that year some 500 workers attended in Bodinstown the commemoration of the leader of the United Irishmen, Wolf Tone.

They marched with a banner declaring: "Shankill Road Belfast Branch. Break the connection with capitalism. Connolly's message our ideal. Onto the Workers Republic".

The right-wing IRA leadership ordered the banners to be removed and fighting followed. The Belfast workers were not deterred and the next day they marched through Dublin to Connolly's grave to hear one of the Shankill men declare:

"We do not pretend to speak on behalf of the majority of Belfast Workers. We are a body of Protestant workers, the Vanguard of the working class, ...[who have come] to pledge our determination at the graveside of Connolly to do all we can to carry out [his] message to break all connection with England and to smash Irish capitalism".

For a short period of history the Congress connected the fight against sectarianism with the fight against exploitation. In 1934 the editorial of the organisations journal

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

stated:

"Sectarianism dies slowly when the fight against it is one of words. Sectarianism burns out quickly when there is team work in common struggle. Those who see in partition just a reflex of sectarian strife can see no way forward except in soft, foolish talk about toleration, charity, real religion, etc.

"Those who see in partition the link between Irish Capitalism and Imperialist finance, however, see in the common struggle for the Workers Republic the solution of partition, and in the destruction of exploitation, the withering of sectarian strife".

When the peak of worker's militancy had passed, the political differences within the organisation emerged. The former republicans and the Communist Party argued for a stages approach. They claimed that a United Ireland had to be achieved before working class struggle could bring socialism. Their main fear was that they might alienate supporters of Fianna Fail. According to one of their leaders, Peadar O Donnell:

"We dare not jump through a stage in the fight, now raising a slogan of a Workers Republic and leaving FF to say that they are for one kind of republic and we stand for a different."

This was a position that totally alienated Protestant workers and led to the fragmentation of the Congress in 1936.

The Second World War

The Second World War provides important evidence to firstly dispute the idea that in the North that British nationalism and thus Unionism is impossible to overcome, and secondly that Protestants put loyalty to the crown before loyalty to the class.

Two days after a rally in Belfast of 10,000 against conscription the British cabinet declared that its introduction in the North "was more trouble than it was worth". They were influenced by the confidential report of the Inspector General of the RUC, Charles Wickham which stated: "it is extremely doubtful if conscription has the whole-hearted support of either section of the population".

There was also great concern at the level of industrial action. In April 1943 the Sunday Pictorial claimed that "over the previous 9 months, 3 million working days had been lost in Northern Ireland owing to strike action ... The working class were a disgrace to Britain and the Empire".

In fact 2 major strikes amongst many minor ones showed how little workers were tied to "Britain and the Empire".

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Belfast factory strike, 1942

In September 1942, electricians in the engineering factories struck when a non-union worker was hired by management. This soon dove-tailed with a strike in Shorts triggered off by the sacking of 2 shop stewards. They had argued that women had the right to work overtime on Sundays.

As well as being attacked by the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Andrews, and all the Belfast papers, the growing strike attracted criticism from more unexpected sources.

William McCullough of the Communist Party publicly condemned their actions:

"Today the streets of Stalingrad, the Volga River and the country between it and the Don river are drenched in blood and yet in Belfast, during the greatest crises in the history of humanity, aid to our Russian comrades is being held up because of strikes. An hour lost in the factories of Northern Ireland is an hour gained for Hitler".

Worse still, Harry Midgely, an MP for the NILP to brought up sectarian implications:

"The extension of the strike played right into the hands of the subversive elements and influences in the community".

Nevertheless support for the strikers grew and the result was that even more stopped work on the 15th October. The Government attempted to diffuse the situation by announcing the setting up of a Court of Inquiry to investigate the causes of the Belfast strike.

Within 5 days the court recommended the 2 shop stewards be re-instated. The management agreed and the Union leaders urged a return to work but at mass meetings the strikers rejected the offer since all their demands had not been met.

It wasn't until the employers suspended the non-union worker that the strikers voted to go back at mass meetings involving nearly 4000 workers. Even then 25% voted against a return to work.

The Engineers Strike, 1944

On the 25th February, 1944 more than 3000 engineers struck at the Harland & Wolff shipyard because the management refused to negotiate a wage claim of three shillings per hour. They were joined 2 weeks later by 3000 workers at Short & Harlands and the next day by a further 6000. By the 25th March 20,000 workers were involved in the strike.

Again it was the Belfast shop-stewards movement who co-ordinated the strike

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

whilst attempts were made to crush it. On Monday 3rd April, 5 shop-stewards were sentenced to 3 months imprisonment for taking part in the strike. The workers knew what they were up against.

As hundreds of strikers crowded the court the chair of the shop stewards movement thanked the judge for his impartial hearing of the case. The shop stewards movement gave their simple reply to the verdict in a telegram to the P.M.:

"Men in shipyard demand release of shop stewards sentenced yesterday. Men in shipyard cease work 5.30pm Tuesday if this request not granted".

Their promise was carried out as 20,000 more struck in protest, dockers closed the ports and despite the Union leaders pleas, for a time the jailed strikers refused to apply for bail, preventing a way out for the authorities. Belfast was paralysed in a general strike.

The CP and trade union leaders sent a delegation that pressured the men into accepting bail and going for an appeal. The bosses seized their chance and offered a pay rise to the workforce and a little more power to the shop-stewards. The appeals were rushed through and found in favour of the stewards. The strikers returned to work on Monday 10th April.

The need for political unity

Both of these war time strikes were short in length but the lessons are clear. Firstly the strikes were initiated, co-ordinated and led from an organisation distinct from the official labour movement. In fact the leaders of the labour movement—from the NILP, CP and trade union officials did their best to undermine the strike and promote harmony between workers and the employing class.

Secondly, the strikes though based mainly on Protestant workplaces, did involve significant numbers of Catholic workers. They were based in the factories directly affected but additionally in those areas that produced sympathy action such as the docks. Class unity and solidarity are essential ingredients for workers to better themselves in a capitalist society.

Thirdly, although direct confrontation with the forces of the state was not as stark as in the Relief riots, nevertheless Protestant workers defied "their" government, rejected the increased chauvinism due to the war and put their class before the sectarian appeals of those who claimed to lead them.

Finally, there was a weakness in the movement. The shop-stewards limited their goals to improving and defending conditions—and although they won great victories, these alone were not sufficient to eradicate sectarianism in the working class.

To have permanently held together a group of workers against sectarianism would

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

have required that they go beyond just being trade union members to joining a socialist party.

Today

This record of working class struggle is not just a matter of history. The 1980s has certainly seen major defeats on the labour movement and the introduction of vicious anti-trade union legislation by the Tories.

In the North this was reflected in the level of industrial action. The number of working days lost in industrial action in the 1970s averaged 260 thousand a year, throughout the 1980s this dropped to less than a quarter reaching an average of 61 thousand days lost a year.

However even in this situation workers have not remained passive and disputes have taken place to show that the working class is still alive and kicking. In 1981 health workers in Britain and Northern Ireland were involved in a struggle to push back Tory attacks on the NHS.

The level of action in the North was higher than in most parts of Britain with workers from Harland & Wolff and Shorts blocking the Sydenham Bypass, a major road into Belfast, in support of the health service. Mainly Protestant workers from the shipyards joined mainly Catholic workers from the Royal Victoria Hospital on the Falls Road, to defend their hospitals.

Three years later there was massive support for the miners from Protestants and Catholics in terms of collections and accommodating miners. In 1988 the seafarers dispute saw workers in the North occupy a ship before being evicted by the RUC. Civil Servants, council workers, Telecom workers and many others have taken action at some stage through the eighties.

Working class unity has existed in practice from before the birth of the northern state to the present day. The lesson from past experience has also been that there has to be a set of politics which can take this desire for unity forward. That is why we must look at the two main strands of politics that radicalised workers in Northern Ireland have often looked to: the labourist and republican traditions.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

5. Republicanism

Republicanism has commanded the allegiance of tens of thousands of Catholic workers for more than two decades. Their support for this cause has brought much sacrifice. Between 1969 and 1990 over ten thousand people have been imprisoned. The movement has deep roots in Catholic working class areas in the North.

The growth of the IRA and Sinn Fein cannot be explained outside of an understanding of the role of the British army in Ireland. Prior to 1969, the IRA was a tiny force. According to one writer, Boyer Bell, the Belfast IRA in 1969 had "only a few active scattered volunteers, a collection of veteran republicans in reserve and almost no arms". What transformed it into a mass force was the contradictions that emerged when the Northern state was subject to the demand for civil rights for Catholics.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was founded in the mid sixties to raise a number of modest issues. They protested against a situation where voting in Derry was gerrymandered to create an artificial Unionist majority on the city council. They demanded that houses and jobs be allocated by local councils without any discrimination. They had hoped to achieve reform within the state.

Instead these modest demands provoked an immense crisis. The Northern state was locked into the sectarianism of the Orange Order. Every Prime Minister was a member of this organisation. Even the most liberal Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill betrayed the near racist attitude that existed in the top circles of the ruling Unionist establishment towards Catholics. After leaving office, O'Neill said,

"It is frightfully hard to explain to Protestants that if you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house they will live like Protestants, because they will see neighbours with cars and television sets.

"They will refuse to have eighteen children, but if a Roman Catholic is jobless and lives in a ghastly hovel, he will rear eighteen children on National Assistance...

"If you treat Roman Catholics with due consideration and kindness, they will live like Protestants in spite of the authoritarian nature of their church"

At first O'Neill was pushed by the British government to embark on a programme of reform to meet the demand for civil rights. But every concession provoked a massive outcry from right wing bigots such as Ian Paisley and William Craig. The very security forces that O'Neill and the British government relied on to push through their reforms were among those who stood to lose the most. By August 1969, areas like the Bogside in Derry were subject to a siege by the RUC, the B Specials and right wing mobs who were determined to take revenge on them.

The British army arrived in the North in the midst of this crisis. It presented itself initially as a peace-keeping force that aimed to keep "the warring sides apart". But it

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

soon became clear that the aim of the British army was to shore up the Northern state by a policy of repression before starting to wean the Unionist regime towards a strategy of reform. In April 1970, General Freeland the British Army commanding officer announced that petrol bombers would be shot dead on the spot. In July a mandatory six month sentence was imposed on anyone found at the scene of a riot. In the same month, the Falls Rd in West Belfast was saturated with CS gas and a military curfew was imposed on the area. Five people were shot dead and 300 were arrested and then, to add insult to injury, prominent Unionist politicians were given a tour of the area in army jeeps.

Two events in particular exposed the lie that the British army was a peace keeping force. The first was the introduction of internment in August 1971. Three hundred and forty-two men—all from Catholic areas—were locked up without trial. One of them Henry Bennet describes what happened when they were taken to an army base.

"I was forced to run over broken glass and rough stones to a helicopter without shoes. I was forced to crawl between policemen back to the building. They kicked me on the hands, legs, ribs and kidney area"

Fourteen internees were taken as guinea pigs for an RUC experiment in "deep interrogation techniques". They were subject to varying techniques of sensory deprivation. The British government was later convicted before the European Court of Human Rights for this form of torture. Internment provoked a massive outcry. In Derry 8,000 workers took strike action. A rent and rates strike began in most Catholic working class areas. And hundreds more joined the IRA.

The second was the murder of 13 people in Derry at the hands of the Para regiment on Bloody Sunday in 1972. Wilford, the commanding officers of the Paras on the day was subsequently given an award on the 1973 Honours list. The people of Derry had a different reaction. The coroner at the inquest on the deaths said "it was sheer unadulterated murder."

Throughout Ireland hundreds of thousands of workers stopped work in protest and the British Embassy in Dublin was burned to the ground. Yet most of the official leaders of the labour movement distanced themselves from the reaction of anger. The NILP's only M.P. in Stormont simply called on the government to take measures to save lives. The Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU held a special delegate conference within days of Bloody Sunday but there was no condemnation of Bloody Sunday. Faced with the fact that no other organisation gave vent to their anger, thousands more looked to the republican movement. Hundreds queued up to join the IRA.

The IRA then grew in response to the violence of the state. This simple fact is disguised by those who talk of it as if a couple of "godfathers" have recruited an army of psychopaths. If it were not for the repression and sectarianism of the Northern state,

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

the IRA would not be a mass force today.

This is also what makes the IRA fundamentally different from the loyalist paramilitaries. Organisations like the UDA grew out of a desire to defend and preserve the old Stormont regime. Its origins can be traced back to the Shankill Defence Association which played an active role in trying to drive Catholics out of their houses 1969. For the UDA all Catholics are potential enemies. They claim that "the Catholics are trying to overwhelm us". Not surprisingly this leads groupings like the UDA to align with extreme right and fascist forces. Its members have in the past been assisted by the National Front in Britain to gain access to arms and military training.

Put simply, the UDA and the UVF exist as organisation to perpetuate and deepen the oppression of Catholics. The IRA grew out of a struggle to end that oppression. But there are two questions that need to be asked about its politics and activities: Can it in any way be used as a vehicle for bringing a socialist Ireland? Can it lead Catholic workers to a situation where they do not face sectarianism and harassment?

Republicans and Socialism?

In the 1980s, Sinn Féin began to present itself as a "democratic socialist organisation". It claimed to stand more in tradition of James Connolly rather than Pádraig Pearse. Its promise was that in an "Éire Nua" there would be radical economic policies which put the resources of Ireland into the hands of the people.

But there was always a reluctance to spell out exactly what was entailed. Marxism was rejected as a foreign ideology. Danny Morrison, for example, argued that "Sinn Féin is not a Marxist organisation and indeed many of its members and leaders such as Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are committed Catholics".

Instead the party tried to discover specifically Irish models to follow. It was claimed that the Democratic Programme of the First Dail pointed a way forward for Irish workers. This was a vague document that was drafted in 1919 by the moderate leader of the Irish Labour Party, Tom Johnson. Even then it had to be amended so as it would not offend the sensibilities of the conservatives in that Dail.

In the absence of any official documents on the subject, many republicans looked to Cuba as a possible model for what they sought to achieve. The Cuban revolution certainly dealt a blow to US domination and raised literacy levels in the country. But this was not socialism. Workers did not control their factories and were not even allowed to join free trade unions. A small privileged elite often known locally as the "Rolex watchmen" continued to exist. The goal of the Cuban economy was the accumulation of capital and national development rather than answering the needs of working people. The tragedy of that revolution was that the country swapped a dependence of the USA for a dependence on the former USSR. When that regime

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

collapsed, Cuba was thrown into complete chaos.

Even when Sinn Fein was going through its left phase it argued that the fight for socialism had to be postponed until the distant future. According to Gerry Adams,

"I don't think that socialism is on the agenda at all at this stage except for the political activists of the left. What is on the agenda now is an end to partition".

The fight against partition and the fight for socialism were two separate struggles. A united capitalist Ireland was set as the immediate goal. This could only mean an extension of structures which presently exist in the 26 counties. Such a solution would only mean adding the dole queues of Dublin to those of Belfast. Many will ask if all this sacrifice was worth it so that the unemployed could be picking up the cheque at post offices which had the symbol of the harp and not the crown?

Postponing the fight for socialism had also consequences for how the republicans organised. Left wingers and right wingers were welcomed into the same organisation as long as both were committed to an armed struggle to win Irish unity. Divisive issues that did not seem relevant to the fight for national independence were often put to one side. The republican leadership has been loath to take a stance on issues such as abortion or the opening up of a Brook centre in Belfast in case this would alienate people who were right wing but for a united Ireland.

The fall of Eastern Europe in 1989 has brought about a change in political perspective in many nationalist movements across the world. Up to then groups like the IRA, the PLO, the ANC often adopted a left rhetoric. Their goal was always for their community or nation to join the world system as political equals. But they saw the USSR as representing the "socialist bloc" in that system. When that regime collapsed they often decided that since there was only one superpower in existence they would have to come to terms with US imperialism.

This has led many nationalist movements to drop their left rhetoric. Instead they now seek to press for a "social contract" in their respective countries. In El Salvador, the left wing guerrillas of the 1980s now argue for social peace with the butchers of the ARENA party who organised the death squads. In South Africa, the ANC talks about the need for a power sharing government with the racists until the next century. In the name of this new realism, the nationalists groupings work actively to try to demobilise workers struggle.

Something of similar process is at work in Ireland. Since the 1990s, the republicans rarely talk about socialism. Their aim now is simply to "raise the nationalist agenda". This has meant calling for EC or UN intervention in Ireland. It has even led Gerry Adams to welcome the election of Bill Clinton and press for sending a US envoy to Ireland. But this bomber of Baghdad holds out nothing for either Catholic or Protestant workers. All of this shows that republicanism can never be considered a vehicle for bringing about a socialist Ireland.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Republicans and oppression

But if the republicans are not concerned with fighting for socialism, cannot they at least bring about a situation where the sectarian Northern state is destroyed?

Even here there are major problems. The last twenty years has seen continued resistance to the RUC and the British army. But the struggle has not broken through.

One of the main reasons for this is that the Catholics are a minority in Northern Ireland. The strategy of the British government has been to contain the struggle to particular areas. One British Army general described how parts of Northern Ireland needed to be "encased in concrete".

The only way to counter this is to connect the anger against oppression to the concerns of other workers in Northern Ireland, Southern Ireland and, indeed, Britain itself. The tactics and politics of republicanism means that it cannot do this.

The armed struggle is seen as *the* most important form of struggle. In the words of Martin McGuinness it is "the cutting edge" of the resistance. In reality, it is more and more counter-productive.

Firstly, it leads to passivity in Catholic working class areas. In the early 1970s, thousands took to the streets to resist the British army. Today the biggest mobilisations are for anniversaries of events that happened more than a decade ago. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, made the classic Marxist argument against the focus on armed struggle when he said that:

"It belittles the role of the masses in their own consciousness, reconciles them to their powerlessness and turns their eyes and hopes towards a great avenger and liberator who some day will come and accomplish his mission."

Second, the tactic helps to lock the anger against oppression into a ghetto. If your door is broken in by the troops in Ballymurphy, you can sympathise with the IRA. But if you are living in Ballymun in Dublin or parts of South Belfast it makes no sense.

This is why the armed struggle always creates openings for supporters of the British army to blame the IRA as the cause of the violence. After Warrington, for example, tens of thousands took to the streets in the South in a short lived peace movement that refused to tackle the real causes of the violence.

Third, the armed struggle is inevitably shaped by the communal concerns of those who wage it. Protestant workers are seen as part of a hostile Unionist camp. As a result, much of the bombing campaign is waged against Protestant towns like Bangor or Coleraine. This plays into the hands of the UDA and UVF. They set themselves up as protectors of the Protestant working class.

So while the IRA is by no means the cause of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, the

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

tactic of armed struggle is seen by many Protestant workers as directed at them—and this drives them towards the far right.

But it is not just the tactics of republicanism that are wrong. Their nationalist politics means that they cannot make a breakthrough.

Republicanism can offer little to Southern Irish workers whose state is no longer dominated by Britain. Southern Irish workers face Irish bosses like Goodman or Smurfit as well as US multi-nationals.

While many sympathise with the goal of united Ireland, few will mobilise to fight for the green flag of Ireland when it will mean more of the Goodman and Smurfit's.

Nor can republicanism offer any thing to Protestant workers beyond vague promises of peace after a united Ireland has been established. It cannot connect up with the anger that many Protestant workers feel today.

This was illustrated dramatically when both Catholic and Protestant workers faced massive attacks on their hospitals as part of the Tories privatisation plans. The major point that *Republican News* made was that "jobs lost in West Belfast are less politically sensitive to the British and Unionists than jobs lost elsewhere".

This is clearly nonsense. Instead of pointing out that the Tories regarded all workers as underlings to be walked on, Sinn Féin could only focus on the jobs in its community.

Yet the best way of breaking down bigotry is to point out workers common interests and then to show how in practice sectarianism holds back the struggle on our side.

Because republicanism cannot do this, it cannot offer a way forward in the battle against oppression.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

6. Labourism in Northern Ireland

One of the oldest "solutions" to the sectarianism that exists in the North has been to call for the setting up of a Labour Party. The argument that it would normalise the political situation appears in two ways. In its moderate form, it is claimed that the setting up of a Labour Party would divert the attention of workers in the North from their sectarian parties (Unionist, SDLP, Sinn Féin etc).

In its "left" form, the Labour Party would be a way of uniting Protestant and Catholic workers in a mass party not only to "defeat sectarianism" but also to build socialism. For both cases the model is the British Labour Party.

Throughout the history of the North there has been attempts to maintain such a party. However its failure lies both in its members reluctance to back workers in struggle and in their pandering to the sectarian divide.

Any socialist party that ignores the roots of division under the banner of unity will simply tailend the mood within the class. If the division remains unchallenged then with the rise of sectarianism the class will look to their sectarian parties. The history of the Northern Ireland Labour Party shows this.

Connolly and the ILP

One of the first labourist organisations in Belfast was the Independent Labour Party. Although the ILP was formed nearly 30 years before partition in 1893 the arguments that have since emerged on the question of the border could be seen then in their embryonic form.

It was the Home Rule question that dominated political discussion at that time. The founder of the ILP, William Walker insisted that the party should remain affiliated to the British based ILP. James Connolly, organiser of the southern based Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) recognised that Walkers stance led Walker to advocate an anti-Home Rule position. As a result Walker would make concessions to imperialism and the effect would be to strengthen the hold of Unionism over Protestant workers.

Connolly argued for one nationally based socialist organisation in Ireland to combat the common capitalist enemy North and South. A socialist party in the North that upheld the link with Britain would be seen as "the sign of a family quarrel among unionists". Connolly exposed the sham internationalism of Walker and realised that the partition of Ireland which would lead to a "carnival of reaction" would divide the working class.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Republicans claim Connolly's tradition today but only by distorting his politics. His call for one socialist organisation North and South came from an understanding that to do otherwise would feed into sectarianism. His argument was therefore a concern against the division of the working class and not for the cause of nationalism.

Connolly's position was a clear warning of what a Labour Party would be like if it made concessions to Unionism. Walker on the other hand completely over-estimated the unity his organisation had achieved whilst calling for the link with Britain. Ten years before the worst sectarian riots ever seen in the North, leading to mass expulsions of Catholics and Protestant socialists from the shipyards Walker claimed that "it ha[d] now become impossible in Belfast to have a religious riot and this is due to the good work done by ... the ILP".

The NILP

The Northern Ireland Labour Party emerged from the ILP after the period of partition. The NILP was founded in 1924, existed for almost 60 years and illustrated perfectly the problems of calling for a Labour Party today.

Typically the party would be pushed on to the political agenda after a period of workers struggle or high unemployment. It would play down the discriminatory aspects of the Northern state for the sake of unity. This would be unity on the lowest common factor ignoring why "unity" had to be called for in the first place and refusing to look for what caused division. After an ebbing away of struggle or because of the effects of demoralisation from unemployment, the unionist ruling class would encourage sectarianism and use the forces of the state to increase division.

In the face of the polarisation of the working class the NILP would accommodate to the mood and emphasise their unionist credentials. The result was that Protestant workers would look back to the real unionist party and Catholic workers would look to alternative organisations that at least recognised discrimination.

The politics of winning votes

The NILP throughout its history consistently refused to back workers in struggle. This meant they failed to take up seriously the issue of discrimination to strengthen united action. A strategy based on "vote for us at the next election" meant continuously delaying any struggle for an electoral victory that never seemed on the cards. This delay had three effects.

Firstly, working class anger was channelled into a passive response—voting. Secondly, the NILP argued the solution of economic problems could only be solved if Ulster participated centrally in the planning of the British economy. Thirdly, as a consequence, workers in the North, far from being part of the solution themselves were told to hope for a Labour Government in Britain.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

The strategy led the NILP as an organisation to view struggle from the sidelines and it was left to others to organise workers. In 1932 during the ODR riots the NILP opposed direct action so the strike was led by the RWG. The strikes during the second world war were led by the shop stewards movement with the NILP calling on workers to back the war effort.

Accommodating sectarianism

After partition, with unemployment on the rise to 24% of the working population, the NILP had its only 3 candidates elected as MP's to the Stormont Government. By 1929 its vote had risen to nearly 23,500.

At this time the Unionist Party was developing its strangle hold on the new state apparatus. This included manipulating electoral boundaries, changing the voting process, establishing the notorious B Specials and making the vicious Special Powers Act permanent. All the time sectarianism was used to dampen down the development of class consciousness amongst the working class. For instance there was "a marked increase in anti-Catholic rhetoric in the North notably at the 12th celebrations in July 1930, 31 and 32".

On July 12th 1933 the Prime Minister Sir Basil Brook appealed to Loyalists wherever possible "to employ good Protestant lads and lasses". The NILP as a party remained ambivalent on the question of sectarianism and consequently their vote dropped by almost 40% in 1933.

A similar situation developed after the Second World War. Shop stewards within the NILP had built up respect within sections of the working class because of the leadership they gave to strikes. It was their position as shop stewards that gained them the credit since the NILP as a party attacked the strikes. Nevertheless the party benefitted through the rise in class confrontation and the expectation of living in a better world, a feeling developed from the suffering and sacrifice given in almost 6 years of bloody war.

In 1945 the NILP together with the Independent Labour Party polled almost 115,000 votes. This was a major turning point for the labour movement as these parties together averaged 72,000 votes for the next 25 years. This was partly due to the prosperity that western society was able to give in the 1950s and 60s, but it also showed that the idea that class was a bigger divide than religion was gaining an audience within the working class.

The vote was not always even throughout this period and it dropped dramatically when the division within the class widened. It dropped by a third in 1949 during a marked rise in sectarianism.

During this time a mainly nationalist organisation called the Anti-Partition League began making demands to curb the excesses of the northern state. Orange bands and loyalist mobs were used to break up the APL meetings. The rank and file of the NILP initially opposed the rise of sectarianism and called for the repeal of the Special Powers

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Act, the disbanding of the B specials and the release of political prisoners.

The Labour MP for Oldpark, Belfast, even welcomed an Irish Labour Party TD to the party's 1948 conference saying that "they had a common objective and that was to see a socialist Ireland". However the electoral nature of the party meant that as the polarisation continued to worsen, such a position could alienate sections of Protestant workers who continued to hold illusions in unionist organisations. This might lower their vote.

In January 1949 the Unionist Prime Minister—Brooke called an election to strengthen the Government's hand. He declared that "it was imperative that our determination to remain under the Union Jack should be immediately re-affirmed ... No Surrender".

The same month the NILP stated that it "accepts the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and the close association with Britain and the Commonwealth". After the election in that year a special delegate conference was called to mandate the party to this position and was passed on a vote of 2000 votes to 700.

The NILP had now formally adopted a Unionist programme. This meant that the reforms they called for had to be made within the six counties. Since discrimination and the oppression that goes with it, is built into the structures of the Northern state such as the police, the judiciary, industry etc then the NILP had no realistic strategy of overcoming it.

Unemployment in the 1960s

In 1961 it was announced that 8000 workers at Harland and Wolff were to lose their jobs. The same number at Shorts were under threat. This sparked a mass walkout followed by a demonstration involving over 20,000 workers. The mood of anger was increased when the largest spinning firm in Belfast closed down with the loss of 1700 jobs.

Unemployment stood at over 7% compared to 1.2% across the water. A "Save Shorts" campaign was launched that called meetings and organised demos. The May Day march of 1962 was the largest since the strike of 1919 and the NILP's vote doubled. In August 12,000 workers marched to the City Hall to hear NILP MPs and Southern Labour Party TDs.

Rather than looking to workers to use their own economic muscle these MPs put demands on the Unionist Government and emphasised the need to vote Labour.

The demands of the NILP were cosmetic—more planning and Government aid, greater co-operation with Trade Unions. The Unionist Party now under O'Neill easily accommodated. In 1964 O'Neill recognised the Northern Committee of ICTU, announced plans for a new town, 4 new motorways and a second university.

He had stolen the policies of the NILP. As a result the mood of anger in the working class dissipated and despite standing more candidates the NILP vote declined by

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

10,000. The NILP had directed the anger into Stormont where the Unionist Government could take back the initiative.

The NILP and Civil Rights

O'Neill had introduced limited changes that had undermined the NILP. Although sometimes painted as a liberal he used the changes to divide workers on the question of resources, many of the changes he announced were for Protestant areas. The NILP at first used this fact to distinguish themselves from the Unionist Party and criticised O'Neill in their 1965 manifesto:

"No attempt has been made by the Northern Ireland Government to knit the community together; there have been no electoral reforms, no review of electoral boundaries ... The siting of the new university, the siting and naming of the new city [Craigavon] give the maximum offence ... [O'Neill] has added a new bitterness and disappointment to the grievances of the minority".

At their annual conference the party voted for the repeal of the Special Powers Act and to campaign "for one man one vote". As the civil rights movement took off, the demands of the NILP hit a chord with Catholics—who joined the party since there was little alternative at the time.

At the same time the party could stress "the link with Britain" to maintain Protestant support. In 1970 they polled nearly 100,000 votes but within 3 years it had melted to 17,000 and by the end of the decade the NILP existed no more. What had happened in these years to bring about such a dwindling of support?

Those 3 years had seen the most vicious attack on those fighting for civil rights. The state threw everything at them and the Unionist Parties resorted to sectarian attacks. Internment was introduced in August 1971. In January 1972 thirteen unarmed protesters were shot dead by the army on Bloody Sunday and later that year direct rule was established. Almost two-thirds of the 1,900 civilian deaths that occurred during the 20 years after 1969 took place between the years 1971-1976.

The polarisation continued in 1974 with the Ulster Workers Council strike and collapse of power sharing. The electoralism of the NILP meant that it looked to the largest pole to attract votes. But this pole already had its own political expression—the Unionist Party and therefore the NILP had to prove that their Unionist credentials were better than that of the Unionists.

In 1975 their manifesto declared that "the traditional Unionist Parties have all proved inadequate to the task of defending the Union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain" and that it would "fight for the maintenance of the Union" since it "serves the class interest of all the working people of Ulster".

In a tradition that stems back to Walker the NILP had failed to address the major division within the working class and sided with the state in opposition to those who fought back against their oppression. The organisation was unable to see that it was

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

in the interests of all workers to oppose oppression.

Instead the NILP declared, at a time when internment existed, that it "recognises the right of a democratic state under terrorist attack to resort to special measures to defend itself". Worse, it identified those the state discriminated against as being the cause of the "troubles". Hence the "internal source of inter-communal conflict" arose from "the inability or unwillingness of a significant section of the Ulster people to identify with and give allegiance to the institutions of Government in Northern Ireland and that their attitude has only succeeded in keeping alive the sectarian political division in Ulster society".

The lessons of Labour

The NILP attempted to bring changes on behalf of the working class through the system of voting. As a result they refused to win individuals to a principled position and accommodated to prevalent ideas to win votes. Since through partition, the media, political parties and business circles, the idea of Unionism appears to be strongest with Nationalism offering no real alternative, the party inevitably accepted a Unionist agenda.

The instability of the Northern state is obvious, the presence of the British Army being the most visible proof. To fight for any major reforms is to threaten its fragility and so a socialist organisation must be prepared for such a consequence. The NILP time and again put the defence of the state before fighting for real reforms and hence was always marginalised when struggle appeared.

The NILP sought workers unity—ballot box unity. Whilst this showed that thousands of Protestants and Catholics have voted along class lines rather than religious, only through their active co-operation in struggle can lasting workers unity be achieved.

To ignore the extended discrimination and oppression of the Catholic section of the working class weakens the whole class. The state and rulers have always and will continue to attack this Achilles heel. It is therefore in the direct interests of Protestant workers to fight this discrimination so that all the class can move forward. This is true for the short term gains in the work place as well as the longer term aim of removing the class system that divides us in the first place.

The attempts to revive a Labour Party in Northern Ireland are mistaken. That road has been tried, and has proven to be a dead end.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

7. The Socialist Alternative

The rulers of Britain and Ireland have no solutions for Northern Ireland. In the longer run, they probably favour a situation where there is institutionalised power sharing with each "community" having veto over the other.

This could be backed up by some system in which there is a "pooling of sovereignty" where the British and Irish governments both have a role in managing the set-up.

These are proposals which amount to nothing more than making permanent the communal divisions that exist now.

It would establish a situation where right wing politicians claim to represent their community. They would manoeuvre and vie against each other in order to preserve their power bases.

Given the constraints of a capitalist system that is in decline in Northern Ireland, the politicians' only option would be to encourage workers to engage in sectarian competition with each other.

Today no other section of Irish society beyond the working class has any interest in solving the problems left over by the partition of the country. The Southern rulers may talk about the historic desire for national unity. But they are terrified by any moves to weaken the Irish border. This is why they have been willing to hang, jail and censor republicans.

They know that those who have had more than twenty years of struggle in nationalist working class ghettos would never settle for their miserable set up. They also know that the mass of Protestant workers could never owe them any loyalty. Whatever disagreements they have with the British ruling class are entirely minor and tactical.

That workers are the central class in solving the problems left over by colonialism was understood by the greatest revolutionaries of the past. Connolly devoted much of his energies to arguing against the idea that a "union of classes" could achieve Irish freedom. He warned that the Irish capitalist class:

"Have now bowed the knee to Baal, and have a thousand economic strings in the shape of investments binding them to English capitalism as against every sentimental or historical attachment drawing them toward Irish patriotism;

"Only the Irish working class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland"

In Russia at the start of the century, Trotsky made similar points. Most socialists at that time argued that before workers could take power, the problems created by Tsarism—lack of democracy, the land question—had first to be solved.

In reply Trotsky developed his theory of Permanent Revolution, which argued that the liberals feared the rising working class more than they hated the Tsarist state. The working class would be the only force to fight the Tsar to the finish.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

As a result of a working class victory, not only would the Tsar be overthrown but the capitalist class as well. The battle for democracy in Russia would be won as part of a fight for socialism.

After 1917 Trotsky extended his analysis to the situation in the colonies. Up to this point, many socialists had believed that it was necessary to align with the "national bourgeoisie" to achieve independence before the struggle for socialism could commence.

But again, this class was terrified about stirring up the type of social upheaval that would be necessary to defeat imperialism. Trotsky argued that in the colonies in the 1920s there existed a small but powerful working class alongside great pools of underdevelopment. It fell to the working class to lead the battle against imperialism and in the process begin a fight for socialism.

This approach applies directly to Ireland. The nationalist rulers have lost any interest in pursuing a united Ireland.

Republicanism is left isolated in the ghettos of the North because it is unable to put a message of national independence into terms that make sense to the material interests of any substantial class outside these areas.

Unlike the Protestant manufacturers of the 18th century, there is little prospect of Protestant workers today seeing a United capitalist Ireland in their interest.

All of this indicates that there can be no purely national solution to the Northern Ireland problem which leaves the social relationships untouched. The sectarian state that exists in Northern Ireland today will only be smashed in the course of a struggle which overturns capitalism in Ireland. Only under these circumstances will all workers gain.

What is needed now is an organisation in Ireland that stands for three central issues:

For Workers Unity:

The pessimists argue that Catholic and Protestant workers can never unite. But this pamphlet has shown that there has been a long record of workers from both religions fighting together.

All workers have a direct, material interest in uniting. The situation in Northern Ireland is very similar to that in the Southern states of the US. White workers have often been pulled by racist ideas—but the very fact that they allowed racism to divide their class means that *they themselves* lose out most. One writer put the situation like this:

"What is most dramatic—in each of the blue collar groups, the southern white workers earned less than northern black workers. Despite the continued gross discrimination against Black skilled craftsmen in the North the 'privileged' southern whites earned 34 per cent less than they did. Southern male white operatives averaged 18 per cent less than Northern black operatives."

The lesson is clear. Every idea that one section of workers is superior or more entitled

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

to privilege than another is poison. Those who hold such views become victims of their own prejudices.

Orangeism has been the main reactionary creed that has divided workers. Today however, as the Tories attack the welfare state and treat *every* worker as their enemy, all talk of loyalty to queen and country is thrown back in the faces of workers who hold those ideas.

Workers in Northern Ireland unite on a day to day basis over a variety of issues—to protest at hospital closures, or to fight for better wages. What is needed is a political force that can become involved in those struggles and argue why every idea of privilege, or every defensive idea of sticking up for just one community, has to be broken down.

For getting the British Army out now:

Just as repressive state laws work against all workers, Protestant and Catholic, so too do the forces which implement those laws.

Since the arrival of the troops, to contain and ultimately repress the Civil Rights movement, over 3000 people have been killed as a result of the "troubles".

In the period 1968-87, nearly 32,000 people were injured, nearly 10,000 explosions took place and over 330,000 house searches were undertaken, all "security related". This is not what could be called "peace keeping".

The role of the army is to maintain stability through an "acceptable level" of violence and minimise the political effects felt by Westminster. This means patrolling, observing and harassing Catholic areas.

The army presence, therefore, deepens sectarian attitudes in three ways. Firstly, the implication that Catholics are to blame and require military repression encourages loyalist terror squads to conduct their murderous activities. The affair involving Brian Nelson shows that the army is willing to collude in this process.

Secondly, the army openly sides with extreme loyalists when sectarianism rises. When the UDA intimidated many Protestant workers from going to work during the Ulster Workers Council strike in 1974, the army did nothing.

Similarly during the protests surrounding the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement the army never confronted loyalist road-blocks. This is in stark contrast to way in which they are used to break workers' struggles—such as driving "green goddess" to break the fire fighters' dispute.

Thirdly, the army puts more emphasis on defeating the "terrorists" in the nationalist IRA than it does in countering the banned loyalist UDA and UVF, even though non-involved civilians are more likely to be killed by loyalist paramilitaries.

Forty-one Republicans have been killed on active service and not one loyalist terrorist even though, as the Nelson case illustrates, the level of army intelligence on planned loyalist operations is similar.

Can Protestant and Catholic workers unite?

Therefore the army directly contributes to the level of sectarianism and no worker benefits from their presence here. When the paras ran amok in Coalisland in 1992, Protestants as well as Catholics suffered from their brutality. Even Unionist Party spokesman Ken Mugginis was forced to call for their withdrawal.

The strengthening of any area of the state means that when workers do fight back the capitalist class are in a stronger position. That's why it is in the interest of every worker, Catholic or Protestant to oppose security legislation and demand the immediate withdrawal of the British Army.

For a fight against both states:

North and South, the two states in Ireland are mirror images of one another's sectarianism.

In the North, Unionists use the fear of being overwhelmed by a reactionary Southern state to maintain support for their own policies of discrimination.

In the South, partition is used as a symbol of national injustice, to win workers adherence to the State. For decades Fianna Fail have smothered class differences under the cloak of national grievances.

As a result of posturing against each other, both states have managed to maintain a very high level of repression—across the whole spectrum of civil rights. The troops and police are overtly on the streets in the North, but it is the South which has the highest number of police per person in Europe.

The fight against sectarianism is necessarily one that has to take place both North and South. Every blow against the oppressive features of the Southern state, also sends a wind of change into the North, helping erode the strength of the Unionist view.

The fact that in the South, there is a new generation no longer willing to live under a Church dominated state, was most dramatically shown in February 1992. 10,000 people marching in Dublin for the right of a fourteen year old rape victim to have an abortion led to a great victory over the courts and the church.

These struggles help the emergence of growing numbers interested in fighting for a complete transformation of both states, people who take inspiration from the goal of achieving a socialist Ireland—where workers run society to meet peoples needs.

The Socialist Workers Movement unites socialists North and South, Protestant and Catholic in a party committed to such a transformation.

■ If you agree with us on these fundamental issues, then join the SWM, and help build a real socialist alternative to sectarianism.

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